



Good Read

## Rage Against the Machines

IN A HOUSE FULL OF FINICKY, BEEPING APPLIANCES,  
CHRISTINE GRILLO FINALLY DECIDED TO LIBERATE HERSELF FROM THE  
ALLEGED TIME-SAVERS. NOW HEY KIDS, GRAB A SPONGE!

**DID THE GLOBAL PANDEMIC** kill my dishwasher? It's possible. When the lockdowns began, my three teenagers were suddenly at home for every single meal, and we know it doesn't occur to teenagers to reuse a glass. She—my dishwasher—was getting quite a workout.

She'd been a little off for a while, and I'd wondered whether it would soon be time to put her down. To be honest, I'd fantasized a bit about her demise. My kitchen is tiny, big enough for one person to fit and maneuver comfortably. When the dishwasher door is open, the kitchen shrinks considerably, and in order to put clean dishes into the cabinets, I have to unload everything onto the counter, then close the dishwasher door. Whatever possessed the previous owners to saddle this kitchen with a dishwasher is one of the many mysteries I'll never solve. They only had one child, for Pete's sake!

I'd thought ahead and fleshed out a vision of a modest kitchen redo. I'd remove the dishwasher and build some simple shelves to hold pots and pans. I'd retain the dishwasher hookups for the next owners, if they had a yen for such a machine, but I'd go old-school on the dirty dishes. There would be handwashing and rack-drying in my kitchen.

My kids protested, anticipating my grouchiness, especially around big meals like Thanksgiving. But Thanksgiving only happens once a year, I told them. I can't let one day of feasting govern the other 364 days of shin bruises from walking into the dishwasher door.

Plus, I hate machines. This is something I've learned over the decades, as I've tried to live in harmony with them. I'm the person who dreads getting a new phone because of how many hours it takes to set up. I love my yard, but I hate lawn mowers, and I'm slowly replacing the grass with clover because of it. I think I started to really consider how much we need—or don't need—our machines when I went shopping for a mower. I sought guidance from the guy on the sales floor, and we talked about the cons of the various kinds: The gas-powered ones are fussy, the corded electric ones have those damn cords, and the battery-powered ones are too expensive. "What kind of lawn mower do you have?" I asked him. He smiled, stroked his chin, and said, "I pay the kid down the block to mow my lawn."

When I was married, coexistence with machines was easier because my husband mostly tended to them. Five years into divorce, the détente between me and machines is on fragile ground. A couple of years ago, my dryer stopped



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working, and if I could have afforded to pay someone to repair it, I would have done so gladly. Instead, I relied upon the nice people of YouTube to guide me through diagnosing and fixing the problem. At first, when I thought the problem was a fuse, I nearly lost my mind. No ordinary human with ordinary tools can change the fuses. I suspect most machines these days are assembled by robots, which makes DIY repairs nearly impossible. Then I discovered that the problem was the valve coil, which didn't require fancy tools or extra-human strength.

I pondered how much simpler my life might feel if I got rid of the accursed machine and dried my clothes the way my grandmothers did, on clotheslines out back. It's a tried-and-true method used all over the world, after all! One of my girlfriends, also a single mom, went classic in this way, and it seemed to work for her. In the winter, when it was too cold to dry clothes outside, she strung them up indoors. Everyone adjusted.

Last year, my coffee grinder—it may have been an anniversary gift, actually—stopped working, and I returned to the nice people of YouTube for help. A tidy man walked me through how to take it apart, and about 10 minutes into the video, I realized that one Phillips screwdriver would not be enough. Apparently, I needed a super-short screwdriver to open a hard-to-reach part, and I needed a super-

long screwdriver to disassemble another section. Is it too much to ask that average homeowners be able to repair their own appliances? My daughter watched as I wrapped that sucker up in plastic bags and smashed it to smithereens with my rubber mallet (which, by the way, is a versatile tool, useful for many things, such as resealing paint cans, tenderizing chicken breasts, and other pounding tasks). In the moment, my rage at the machine was outsize, but disposing of the grinder shards was cathartic. I felt as if I'd begun to free myself from the tyranny of unnecessary machines, and my counter was liberated.

Life without a coffee grinder is great. I buy ground coffee from the supermarket. Or if I'm feeling flush, I buy beans from a coffee shop and get them ground on-site, in the cafe's industrial, well-maintained grinders.

I've started giving serious thought to the necessity of every machine in my home. I keep a mental list of appliances I consider indispensable and would definitely repair or replace: the refrigerator, the furnace, the water heater, the oven, the electric kettle. But there are appliances that fall into a gray area, that I might feel relieved to ditch. The printer was one such machine, which I let go of years ago. The convenience of at-home printing will never be worth the hours of agitation required to keep a printer up and running. And what about the washing machine? Fluff-and-fold service at the local laundromat has a lot of appeal.

These days, my favorite appliances are the simplest, demanding a level of maintenance I'm OK with: my French press for coffee, my hori-hori knife for gardening, and a paint roller extension pole. They perform well, and I don't even need to oil them.

As for that dishwasher, I finally ponied up for someone to come to my house and tell me what was wrong with it (and causing it to beep incessantly). Two friendly men wearing masks spent some time with the old girl, and then they told me her electric board was busted. They could replace it for many hundreds of dollars—or I could buy a new dishwasher for just a little bit more. The truth is, I was happy to hear them quote such a high price. It made my decision easy. The dishwasher would go, and I'd gain some storage space. I emptied my cabinets of everything except six plates, six glasses, six mugs, and six bowls. My teenagers would have to reuse or, even better, wash as they go.

There's a certain zen to handwashing dishes. It warms me up in the cold, when nothing else will. It forces me to stand at the sink and look out the window into the backyard, where there are birds and butterflies, or maybe only moonlight. And in a world full of potential novel viruses, handwashing is not a bad thing. Come Thanksgiving, I'll figure something out. Until then, I've got one tiny slice of appliance freedom.



**ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Christine Grillo is a science writer in Baltimore. Her work has appeared in the *Atlantic*, the *New York Times*, and *Audubon*. Her shins are recovering nicely now that she doesn't bonk them on the dishwasher.

CAROLYN LAGATTUTA/STOCKSY

HEADSHOT COURTESY OF CHRISTINE GRILLO